Social integration/isolation, later life

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SOCIAL INTEGRATION/ ISOLATION, LATER LIFE

Dating back to the work of late 19th-century sociologist Emile Durkheim, social scientists have studied people's social embeddedness. The quality and number of one's personal relationships, active involvement in voluntary organizations, and social integration in general are the result of the individual's choices and actions, yet also are shaped by societal circumstances and contexts. Sociologists have studied whether social changes such as changes in family form and the so-called breaking up of the nuclear family (Popenoe, 1993) have led to declining levels of civic engagement and social integration (Putnam, 1995).

DEFINING SOCIAL ISOLATION

Social isolation refers to the absence of close personal relationships with other people. Isolated people do not have others with whom they maintain regular contact, and many maintain only a very small number of relationships that entail only superficial contact. Social isolation refers to the objective characteristic of a situation, or the actual number of persons in one's life, rather than subjective characteristics, such as one's perception that their social ties are insufficient. An important question facing life course sociologists, and especially social gerontologists, is: To what extent is an individual truly ''alone''? One can envision a continuum ranging from complete social isolation at one end to being fully integrated in social relationships and social contexts at the other. The latter end may encompass social contexts such as the household, the family, local organizations such as the church or voluntary organizations, or a virtual context in which people maintain geographically distant contact by means of modern communication techniques, including e-mail or communication using social networking web sites.

Although people who live alone may appear to be at risk of social isolation, many maintain a satisfying network of meaningful social relationships outside their household. Conversely, people in a strained or frosty marriage may feel social isolation, especially if they have few friends or a limited social network outside of the marriage. A social network consists of the set of people with whom one has a direct personal relationship. It might include close family members (e.g., spouse, children), distant relatives (e.g., cousins, in-laws), and a variety of nonkin relationships (e.g., neighbors, friends, colleagues, fellow club members).

THEORETICAL APPROACHES

Old age is a stage in the life course that may be viewed as marked by social isolation. Part of the reason why older people are vulnerable to social isolation is that there are few social expectations about the roles for older adults to fulfill. This perspective, called *disengagement theory*, posits that older people will withdraw themselves from society—as they retire from work outside the house and as friends and family members die—thus resulting in deterioration of their social networks (Cumming, Dean, Newell, & McCaffrey, 1960). Although disengagement theory has garnered little empirical support in recent years, it has provided the foundation for the development of socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 1992). This theory proposes that as they face the end of life, older people specifically disengage from their more and casual distant relationships and instead place greater emphasis on their closest personal ties. Older people are believed to find their emotional engagement with core network members to be particularly rewarding in maintaining their social identity and sharing joys and sorrows. Although the size of older adults' social networks may decline, levels of satisfaction are as high as ever, because older adults' needs change and they prefer the company and support of a smaller, although close-knit, group of significant others.

Older people vary widely in their needs and resources, however (Baltes & Carstensen, 1996). The life-course approach offers a framework for understanding heterogeneity in late life. Life transitions and the trajectories in which they are embedded are a central concern of life-course studies. Many transitions follow socially structured sequences, and many life transitions are intertwined. For example, older adults may move to a residential care facility after death of the spouse who had previously been providing care. The extent to which an older adult is socially isolated or integrated also is shaped by social contexts. In other words, individuals are not simply *excluded*, but there are specific population groups who are most susceptible to the experiences of marginalization and, in turn, social isolation. For example, people whose spouses have died may be excluded from activities with married couples. Specific life events in old age that diminish social integration include widowhood or widowerhood, death or incapacitation of network members, and lack of important resources—such as good health or an ability to travel—both of which help older adults to maintain their relationships (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987; Morgan, 1988).

METHODS FOR STUDYING SOCIAL INTEGRATION

Social scientists use a variety of methods for mapping social networks. Mapping personal networks can provide data showing to what extent people are socially isolated versus integrated (Broese van Groenou & van Tilburg,

2007). Some of these methods focus on the exchange of emotional, instrumental, and material support within relationships, whereas others focus on emotional nature of one's interpersonal ties. A third approach is to document the number and type of formal role relationships one has (e.g., spouse, sibling, worker). Researchers typically select a method that reflects their specific research interests. A key component of all three methods is that a single respondent is asked to provide information about the people in his or her social network; that is, the other network members do not provide assessments of the relationship. As a first step, respondents are usually asked to identify by name those persons (if any) whom they believe make up their network. This procedure results in an assessment of individual's network size, which can vary from no one to a large number of people.

Measures of isolation and integration may reflect both objective and subjective aspects of one's social networks. The number of people in one's network is considered an objective characteristic. By contrast, the feeling that one is loved and supported is considered a subjective measure. Key concepts may be measured in either objective or subjective terms. For example, social isolation may reflect on objective factors, such as having no close relationships, and loneliness may reflect subjective characteristics, such as feeling one has unsatisfying relationships. The two do not necessarily overlap; socially isolated people are not necessarily lonely, and lonely people are not necessarily socially isolated in an objective sense. Where a person ends up on the subjective continuum—ranging from not at all lonely to severely lonely—may also depend on his or her subjective standards and expectations and not only on the actual number of persons in one's network (Perlman & Peplau, 1981). Some people with few social contacts might feel lonely; others might feel sufficiently embedded. An example of the latter situation is that of a person who cherishes his or her privacy and actively seeks to avoid undesired social contacts.

HOW MANY PEOPLE ARE SOCIALLY ISOLATED?

Estimates of the proportion of the general population that is socially isolated depend upon the definition of a social "tie." For example, one study (Höllinger & Haller, 1990) revealed that between 5% and 23% of the respondents in Germany and Austria stated that they had "no friends." These differences may reflect sociocultural differences in how people define the term *friendship*. In some contexts, friendship might refer to a relationship with a person whom one likes very much and with whom one shares a wide range of activities. In other cases, however, friendship refers to merely being casual acquaintances and sharing only a specific interest or activity.

Isolation. *Seniors can feel isolated after losing a spouse.* **DOUG CROUCH/PHOTOGRAPHER'S CHOICE RR/GETTY IMAGES.**

McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brashears (2006) reported that about half the U.S. population say that they do not have anyone with whom they can discuss important matters. The authors of that study concluded that many people in the United States may have weak or nonexistent ties to members of their communities and neighborhoods. However, they also acknowledged that they had limited information on each person's social networks and thus might have overestimated the number of social isolates (or people who did not have a close confidant with whom to share their thoughts). The present author adds the further critique that having "no confidant" is not necessarily the same thing as being socially isolated. For example, one study of older adults living in London revealed that 13% did not have a confidant; however, all had at least one personal network member (Bowling, Grundy, & Farquhar, 1995). In many studies that adopted other methods for assessing social integration, much larger network sizes were observed. Typical network sizes ranged from about 5 to 10 people; in some studies,

higher averages were observed. This indicates that most people are surrounded by a set of people to whom they can turn for help, advice, or emotional support. Consequently, in these studies, only a small number of socially isolated people is observed. Another study of 3,000 Dutch older adults (van Tilburg, 1998) found that only 6 respondents could not identify any network members; the average network size was around 14 people.

Life-course scholars agree that the number of one's social contacts gradually decreases with advancing age. This decrease is partly due to functional or social loss: spousal bereavement, physical and cognitive impairments, or the death of other members of the network. Among older people living at the beginning of the 21st century these events often occur only at an advanced age; age 75 is sometimes taken as a marker for the average age at which a downward development of social integration begins. Given that many older adults start this phase of life with a large personal network, few will end their life socially isolated. Furthermore, losses may be accompanied by gains. For example, retirement enables people to pursue new activities and relationships, as they fill their nonwork hours with friendships and hobbies. Further, increases in life span enable many grandparents to develop emotionally close relationships with their grandchildren when they mature. Increased demands for personal care among older adults may strengthen ties between care givers and care recipients.

CONSEQUENCES OF SOCIAL ISOLATION

The negative consequences of being socially isolated have been documented extensively. People with few contacts may have difficulty in finding a job: Labor market marginality leads to poverty and social isolation, which in turn reinforce the risk of long-term unemployment (Gallie, Paugam, & Jacobs, 2003). Vast evidence suggests that social isolation can threaten one's psychological health, indicated by an elevated risk of depression, loneliness, and suicide among people with few or weak social ties. Furthermore, isolated people lack the health advantages of being connected to other people. Networks contribute to a healthy lifestyle, provide access to information for disease prevention, reduce psychological stress, and enhance beneficiary physiologic responses (Berkman, Glass, Brisette, & Seeman, 2000). Finally, people who lack social ties are more likely to die prematurely, compared with findings in people with more extensive contacts (Berkman & Syme, 1979). It is not the mere presence of relationships that matter but also the frequency with which one maintains contact, how geographically proximate one's network members are, and how emotionally close and fulfilling these relationships are.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Personal relationships are shaped by sociohistorical context. As such, future studies focusing on aging baby boomers may reveal patterns very different from the ones detected among current cohorts of older adults. Two macrosocial changes may have particularly powerful ramifications: changing family structures and the weakening of the geographical foundation of networks.

Decreasing family size and changing family structure (i.e., increasing rates of divorce and remarriage) have typically been interpreted as a sign of decreasing importance of the family. Despite pessimistic assessments of how such changes may affect the social lives of older adults, most research reveals that levels of intergenerational contact and support have not declined concomitantly (Bengston, 2001). However, in the second half of the 20th century the number of childless people has increased. As such, older adults may have fewer—but not necessarily poorer quality—social ties in the future. Furthermore, family structures are becoming increasingly complex, and traditional definitions of ''family'' need to be revised. Relatively high rates of remarriage following divorce (and to a lesser extent, widowhood) have created a growth in the number of stepfamilies. In stepfamilies, family members' roles, norms, and obligations are less clearly defined than in first-marriage families. The loosening of the role-based character of primary kinship is exemplary for other types of personal relationships. Social bonds may be more flexible and fluid. However, not all social observers are optimistic that these social changes will be beneficial to older adults; Allan (2001) has countered that these changes may lead to a fragmented and less predictable social life that in turn may increase the risk of isolation.

A second and related development is the weakening of the geographic basis of relationships. With increasing geographic mobility and widespread reliance on the Internet, networks have transformed from local communities to virtual communities (Wellman, 1999). Among future older generations, social networks may ultimately comprise a mixture of traditional networks, consisting of local kin, friends, and members of social organizations, as well as global networks of long-distance relationships based on shared interests. Although some people profit from technological developments that expand the traditional boundaries of social networks, others will have greater difficulty accessing, initiating, and maintaining such long-distance relationships.

These new family and network structures have predominantly been created in the second half of the 20th century among people who will become the next generation of older people. It is unknown to what extent these developments will lead to an increasing number of

socially isolated people. Are the risks of social isolation anchored in the life course? For example, is vulnerability accumulated across various domains of life, such as when people have a small family, live in a deprived neighborhood, and have a history of divorce or nonemployment? Are deficits in personal networks treatable in old age? These questions will direct the future research agenda.

SEE ALSO Volume 2: *Durkheim, Émile; Social Support, Adulthood;* Volume 3: *Childlessness; Loneliness, Later Life; Marriage, Later Life; Singlehood; Widowhood.*

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